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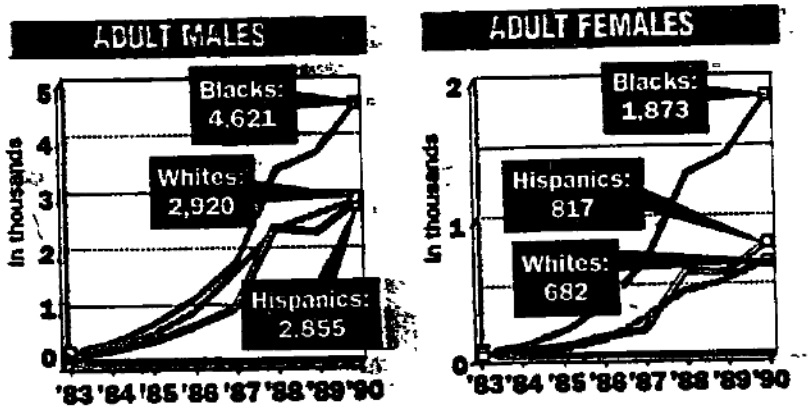
AIDS, drug use: twin epidemics

One-third of all U.S. AIDS cases are related to intravenous drug use. The charts below track how AIDS cases linked to drug use has risen by gender, race and ethnicity:*



*Includes intravenous drug use among heterosexuals; male homosexual and/or bisexual contact and intravenous drug use, and heterosexual sex with an intravenous drug user.

Source: Centers for Disease Control, National Commission on AIDS

Front Page

Recognizing drug abuse link is key to AIDS fight, panel says

By Andrew Mollison
Journal-Constitution Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — A commission appointed by the White House and Congress urged Tuesday the legalization of needles, syringes and other drugs paraphernalia as a necessary step toward cutting the spread of AIDS.

The National Commission on AIDS, which includes Health and Human Services Secretary Louis W. Sullivan, also said inadequate headway is being made in the war against AIDS because the government has not fully appreciated the disease's connection to drug addiction.

The commission's recommendations:

► Encourage addicts to trade used needles for clean needles and bleach. This cuts AIDS risks, while bringing them into contact with counselors who could get them to seek treatment.

► Legalize the purchase and possession of such drug paraphernalia as syringes, needles, cookers, cotton and rinse water, all of which can spread contamination. In 11 states "the very real fear that clean syringes and bleach vials will be used as evidence for arrest and prosecution may be having a 'chilling effect' on drug users' practice of safer injection behaviors."

► Treat all drug abusers who seek treatment. Addicts cannot

Please see AIDS, A4 ►

AIDS: Group recommends providing clean needles to nation's drug addicts

► Continued from A1

wait until perfect treatment methods are found, and it is medically unsound to tell someone with a fatal disease, 'Go away, we'll treat you later.'"

► Change the grants system so agencies fighting drug abuse and those fighting AIDS have incentives to cooperate instead of seeking separate grants.

► Reverse planned funding cuts for research. Spend more finding out details of why and how the spread and progression of the HIV virus is linked to use and abuse of legal and illegal drugs.

► To reach poor people who aren't getting the word on how to avoid AIDS, feed them and house them. "It's hard to educate a woman who is homeless and hungry," Sandra Vining-Bethea of the Bridgeport Women's Project told the commission.

The 15-member panel, which includes U.S. Rep. J. Roy Rowland, a Democrat from Dublin, reported that 32 percent of all AIDS cases in the United States are related to intravenous drug use, a major contributor to the AIDS epidemic, but that this linkage has not been acknowledged by federal agencies.

Most of those cases are caused directly by addicts sharing contaminated needles, and others indirectly, by unsafe sex with an HIV-infected person or being born to a mother who has AIDS.

The commission concluded that the government has not acknowledged the enormity of the link between drug addiction and AIDS and that it must be dealt with more positively.

"I am forced to have sex with approximately 10 men per day to support my habit, which is putting me at risk of further HIV infection, sexually transmitted diseases and rape or death," said Yvette, a woman with a $150-a-day heroin and crack habit cited in the report.

"What I want to tell you is that if I had been accepted into a drug treatment program three years ago, I would not be sitting here in front of you today telling you that I am HIV-infected," she told the commission, which withheld her last name.

Infection with the HIV virus leads to AIDS. About 116,000 of the 182,000 Americans identified as having AIDS have died.

"The current national approach to the problems of substance use is to deal with those who are addicted primarily by means of the criminal justice system," the commission said. "Clearly, this approach is not working, and a public health approach is desperately needed."

That stand "distorts the administration's position on expanding and improving drug treatment," responded former Florida Gov. Bob Martinez, head of President Bush's Office of National Drug Abuse Policy.

He said the commission's report lacks "clear scientific evidence" that needle exchanges reduce risk-taking behavior by drug abusers. Instead, the commission relied on testimony from police and medical witnesses in several cities.

Mr. Martinez said the commission should have stressed that federal spending on drug treatment rose from $697 million in 1988 to the $1.7 billion Mr. Bush has requested for next year. Mr. Martinez did not mention that anti-drug spending for interdiction and law enforcement rose even faster, with an $8 billion request for the next fiscal year